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AUTHOR Schwartzbaum, Allan; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The authors propose a new undergraduate social science curriculum which will enable sociology and anthropology majors to obtain an educational background adaptable to the changing job market. The program, which combines career education and the liberal arts, is organized by different themes which serve as the focus for learning and research within sociology and anthropology. Specific courses are grouped together to form a pattern. Each pattern contains a core of courses within the department and a set of complementary courses outside of sociology and anthropology. Because of its multidisciplinary, problem-solving orientation, the program broadens the availability of career opportunities while sharpening students' intellectual skills. Suggested themes include law and society, social relations in business and industry, and planned change and community development. Themes should be selected on the basis of availability of relevant courses, clear connection between a theme and existing career opportunities, and availability of departmental faculty members to serve as advisors. Implementation of the program should include training sessions for advisors, coordination with the university career placement office, and internships in work settings. (Author/AV)

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A Thematic Approach to the Undergraduate Sociology and Anthropology Curriculum

Allan Schwartzbaum
Joyce Kozuch
Melvin Mednick
Lynn Nelson

Department of Sociology & Anthropology
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia

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"What can I do with a bachelor's degree in sociology or anthropology?"

When undergraduate students have asked this question, the answer for the student with academic interest and aptitude has traditionally been, "Go to graduate school." Those students who terminate their study with a bachelor's degree frequently have found their way into social service or the general labor market, along with other liberal arts majors. As long as the economy continued to expand in the fifties and sixties, neither students nor faculty seriously challenged this pattern. However, the sluggish economy of the seventies has limited graduate school and employment options for students, thus placing more stringent demands on the advising efforts of academic departments.

The problem faced by sociology and anthropology graduates and the departments which produce them is not unique. It is shared with the liberal arts in general. Increasingly, university and college administrators, legislators, parents, and students are concerned and even hesitant about supporting educational programs having no clear connection to future employment goals. The problem is how to meet these concerns without giving up the goals and values of the social sciences or the liberal arts concept of "education for life." We suggest that it is possible to combine sociology and anthropology with other kinds of educational experiences in order to better prepare graduates for work environments. We also think that this can, and should, be done without compromising either the disciplines or the concept of a liberal arts education. In the pages which follow, we outline a proposed revision of a social science curriculum.

Curricular Structure

Undergraduate curricula frequently have not met changing social and personal needs. A curriculum that requires all students to achieve along a single dimension denies the individuality of students and may well diminish

their sense of competence and self worth. Thus the initial pressure for diversity in the 1960's was probably a healthy reaction to the standardized curricular structure of many colleges and universities. The diversity, however, soon produced an overemphasis on individualism that now needs to be moderated. In practice, students often have not used the free elective system to design a well-rounded education for themselves. A curriculum that says to a student, "Here in any term are two hundred and fifty courses, all excellent; take any four or five", can create "a pedagogy of alienation." We often have placed on students the burden of integrating and reconciling the various kinds of knowledge we think are good for them. The evidence ( ) suggests that they frequently have not been successful in constructing a meaningful program. Clearly, students must be free to follow their own interests, to develop their own aptitudes, and to pursue their own goals. But to reject a rigid sequence does not mean that a grab bag of electives is the answer. The task now is to design a curriculum that responds to current social and personal needs, but does not repeat the rigidities that made requirements vulnerable to attack in the first place.

The Role of Liberal Education

The basic question is to determine the proper mix of career preparation and liberal studies. How can we relate studies to the world of work while ensuring sufficient breadth of education among our undergraduates? Too narrow a vocational focus will deprive individuals of the aspects of education that can make life meaningful and satisfying. Liberal arts subjects offer an early initiation into the play of ideas and ideals. They give direction to experience, provide a sensitivity to the problems of others, and reinforce our awareness of the indispensability of human choice in every moral situation.

Demands for "relevance" in education seem to miss the point that a liberal education serves a student better in the long run than does a more vocationally-oriented program. A more general preparation anticipates that a student will be making many changes in life situations, especially just after leaving school. Thus it allows individual flexibility and fosters the ability to adapt to changing societal concerns.

Thematic Approach to Curricula Design

Our program attempts to link the broad perspectives of liberal education with an awareness of employment areas where these perspectives may be applied. We are proposing a program that blends career education and the liberal arts. Crucial to this approach is a concept of the academic department as a "home base," as an expansion of the more limited notion of an "area of concentration." Our educational goal is not to train students solely in sociology and anthropology, but to use these disciplines as a way of synthesizing what is learned in a liberal arts program. The program envisaged here provides a general background which will enable the student to move into a variety of career paths, while retaining the opportunity for particular concentrations within sociology and anthropology.

The curriculum will be organized in terms of different themes. As used here, a theme is a general expression of a large-scale problem, approach or topic which serves as a focus for learning and research within sociology and anthropology. In order to provide the knowledge and background necessary for the appreciation and exploration of a theme, specific courses are grouped together to form a pattern. Each pattern contains a core of courses within the department and a set of complementary courses from departments outside of sociology and anthropology. Each course in the pattern serves to explore and

amplify a different dimension of the same concern or theme. This organization of patterns contrasts with the haphazard character of many student programs by superimposing a particular kind of ordering and rationale on existing courses and requirements. The approach allows the student to make use of the resources of the whole university with a flexibility and depth of focus usually missed at the undergraduate level.

Our proposal does not suggest any options which have not always been available to students. In fact some students have independently discovered this approach and made it the basis of their academic preparation, as the following quote demonstrates:

> Excited every semester by the variety of course options, I would have to narrow them down to a few - some of which I chose unwisely. As the semesters passed and I reviewed my previous choices while considering the new ones and in explaining the thinking underlying my selection to my academic advisor, I began to realize a focus was emerging - a focus that I intend to refine in my later graduate studies. ( )

Most undergraduates, however, do not possess the insights of this student. Most liberal arts students do not recognize the underlying constants and themes contained within their courses.

By suggesting themes and courses that form coherent "packages," we can help students to systematically synthesize knowledge from a variety of sources. The student can examine the complexities of a particular issue or theme while ranging broadly through several disciplines. Because of its multidisciplinary, scholarly, problem-solving orientation, the program would broaden the availability of career opportunities while helping students sharpen their intellectual focus. If there is to be improvement of the educational and career opportunities for our students, then it seems important that we accept the basic assumption

that a variety of educational and career goals can coexist compatibly in the same department.

Departmental Themes

We are proposing nine themes as the framework for our departmental curriculum:

* People, resources and environment
* Planned change and community development
* Law and society
* Deviance and social control
* Social research
* Health and society
* Communication and culture
* Social relations in business and industry
* Continuity and change through the life cycle

The selection of these particular themes was based on the following criteria:

1) The appropriateness of the theme for students primarily interested in either anthropology or sociology.

2) The availability of sufficient relevant courses both within and outside of the department to insure adequate substance and breadth to each theme.

3) A clear and direct connection between a theme and existing career opportunities and/or advanced graduate and professional programs.

4) The lack of duplication between a theme and existing programs at Virginia Commonwealth University.

5) The availability of knowledgeable departmental faculty to serve as thematic advisors to students.

Through this mode of curricular organization, we bring substantive knowledge and special methodologies to bear on issues that confront the larger society. The department can achieve this goal without sacrificing its academic orientation. By anchoring themes to an academic department, students retain the identity provided by a major and faculty avoid the administrative and professional ambiguities frequently associated with non-traditional interdisciplinary programs. The themes become active centers for conceptualization, investigation, and demonstration of appropriate vocational options for liberal arts graduates.

Implementing Efforts

There are a number of possible arrangements which the Department can use to implement the thematic approach. Since the role of faculty is crucial, the suggested initial steps are:

1) to hold training sessions for departmental advisors to familiarize them with the thematic approach and the relation of the themes to actual work situations.

2) to recruit faculty volunteers as advisors for specific themes. Students who decided to pursue a theme would be assigned to the appropriate faculty member. In turn, that person could develop and update career and course information tied to his or her area of advising.

Since this approach is intended to complement university efforts at career guidance, not replace them, another step is:

3) to familiarize the university career placement office with the curriculum plan for the purpose of coordinating counseling efforts.

Since students' interests and needs vary, there are a number of possible arrangements which can respond to that diversity:

4) colloquia to introduce students to the presuppositions, methods and content of relevant academic disciplines, fields of study, and departmental themes.

5) discussion sessions with people in a variety of relevant occupations to make the world of work more immediate to students about to enter it. Alumni can be a particularly valuable resource in this regard.

6) internships in appropriate work settings.

7) a thematic seminar in the senior year to synthesize and integrate previous course work and orient the student toward future applications and career goals. This seminar could become the basis for an honors paper or some other special student project.

Evaluation

Ideally, this should be done by a group of faculty members other than the planning and implementing teams. Components of the evaluation process include:

-- compilation of available base-line data for comparison purposes

-- periodic data-gathering on department graduates, both those who followed specific themes and those who did not.

-- the introduction of the thematic approach to other departments of sociology and/or anthropology to learn from its use in other contexts (This already is occurring.),